

# The Blessed Life

Matthew 5:1-2

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

16 January 2011

According to the French biblical scholar Jacques Dupont, the Beatitudes bring “a revelation of the heart of God.”

So, whatever else they may be, they are also that.

The biblical story reveals the God of Israel to be a Freedom-Giver, an Exile-Ender, a Home-Bringer, and a Life-Bringer, to borrow titles used by Walter Brueggemann. When we were slaves in Egypt, Yahweh, the God of Israel, heard our cries and set us free. When we sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept, remembering Zion, Yahweh listened and brought us home again. When all is chaos, Yahweh’s spirit moves across the waters, creating and renewing, bringing life out of death.

All these experiences of God come together in the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, in a passage essential to understanding Matthew’s beatitudes:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
Because the Lord has anointed me;  
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
To bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives,  
And release to the prisoners;  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,  
And the day of vengeance of our God;  
To comfort all who mourn;  
To provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
To give them a garland instead of ashes,  
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
The planting of the Lord, to display [God’s] glory.  
They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
They shall raise up the former devastations;  
They shall repair the ruined cities,  
The devastations of many generations. . . .

For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,

And I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Then, we get to the Gospel of Matthew, where all these stories of Yahweh, the God of Israel, now get told of Jesus of Nazareth. It is important to quickly summarize the narrative up through Matthew 5 so that we can understand the Beatitudes in their context as part of the story of Jesus.

Before he was even born, Matthew has already told us, that Jesus would be Emmanuel, God with us. Then, just after he was born, the imperial power, in the guise of Herod, attempts to murder this child by slaughtering all the babies in Bethlehem. Matthew quotes Jeremiah this time:

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
She refused to be consoled, because they are no more.

Then Matthew tells, John the Baptist comes preaching the message of the prophets, "Repent, for the reign of God has come near." Jesus, this refugee child, the one promised as "God with us," comes to John to be baptized, and as Jesus comes up out of the water, a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights of fasting and temptation. Then, when he hears of the arrest of John, Jesus goes to Galilee and begins to preach and call disciples. Matthew tells us:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

And immediately upon telling us this, Matthew then tells us,

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them.

And what he taught them drew upon this long story of God with God's people, and particularly with the vision of the prophets, including Isaiah, that God's promise is to comfort those who mourn, to set the prisoners free, to bless those who are persecuted, etc. Anna Wierzbicka, Linguistics Professor at the Australian National University, concludes the meaning of the Beatitudes:

Those who are proclaimed "blessed" are, Jesus implies, blessed now because they are not God-forsaken: on the contrary, God feels their pain, wants to do good things for them because of this pain, and will do good things for them "in the world to come." . . .

The central message of Jesus' original beatitudes . . . seems to be this: there are many forms of human suffering (poverty, hunger, oppression, and persecution), "Rachel weeping for her children" and all the images from Isaiah: the broken-hearted, the blind, the prisoners, and so on; they will all pass; but the special love of God for those who have suffered will never pass.

The Beatitudes ultimately draw our attention back to the Freedom-Giving, Exile-Ending, Home-Bringing, and Life-Bringing God and what that God has in store for us. God will remain present in covenant, solidarity, and love with God's people. So, whatever else they may be, the Beatitudes, rooted in the Hebrew story and exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, reveal the heart of God.

The Beatitudes are the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, what many have taken to be the core teachings of Jesus. Today we begin a seven part series on the Sermon on the Mount, contained within chapters five, six, and seven of the Gospel of Matthew.

I always look forward to preaching and teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, because every time I come back to it, I find a different focus and my view of the sermon has changed somewhat. In future years when the lectionary draws us back to this passage, I will likely take a different approach and say different things. Fortunately, great texts make that possible. As Dale Allison, Jr., Professor of New Testament at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, writes in his commentary, "The Sermon does so many things at once that its goals cannot be succinctly summarized: it has no one end."

The literature on these chapters is vast, and this time around I've read a handful of new studies. I won't be that concerned with making you aware of all the scholarly questions raised by the sermon; maybe we can go over those in a First Forum sometime. I will be mostly concerned with how the teachings in the Sermon challenge, inspire, and comfort us and, in doing so, how they shape us into the people of God. One thing that means for us is how does the Sermon on the Mount call us to be the people of God for Omaha in 2011.

The Sermon on the Mount announces that "everything has changed." That God, as evidenced in Jesus, has set about changing the world. And we are called upon to respond.

It also makes clear that we are to follow by becoming part of a new people of God. As Stanley Hauerwas writes, "You cannot live by the demands of the sermon on your own, but that is the point." He explains "It is the constitution of a people. . . [a] description of the life of a people gathered by and around Jesus."

Now, with that in mind, let us turn back to the passage for today, the Beatitudes. The type of people described here are the type of people who help to save all of us. Let me explain.

Some people misunderstand the Beatitudes. They think that Jesus is saying we all ought to go out and become these sorts of persons. These folk say, "You need to be poor in spirit, you need to mourn, you need to be meek, etc." For these interpreters, the Beatitudes are a set of duties or obligations, or a description of the virtues, of the good and excellent life. For others they are the steps one must take to enter into the kingdom or to experience the beatific vision.

Despite being a common interpretation, and a perspective from which you likely have heard sermons preached, it is not the only view in the history of interpretation of the passage,

nor is it currently the dominant scholarly perspective.

What Jesus is saying is not “Go out and mourn,” but rather, “If you are mourning, then God will bless you.”

Now the truth is, a few of these Beatitudes are things that all of us ought to do, like be merciful or thirst for righteousness. Our culture could use a little more meekness. And if we are really living the Christian life, then, chances are, all of us will be persecuted.

But, even if some of the things mentioned are things we ought to do, the Beatitudes itself is not a list of things we ought to do. That is not their purpose here in the Sermon on the Mount.

Rather, the Beatitudes is a list of some of the types of people who will be found in the family of God. Given who God is, God’s people will include those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, etc.

We have heard this before. God’s people will include those who are so often excluded from human society. Those who don’t fit our secular standards of success. But here it is not just the poor, the oppressed, or the disabled, but also those who are meek, mournful, and hungry.

There is also an important point about religion here. So often, we think that the people of God includes the joyful, the happy, sometimes even the prosperous. The Beatitudes are a reminder that church isn’t just about joy and celebration. This is one of the reasons we have focused attention the last few months on mental illness and mental health as a component of our community life, our worship, and our ministry.

The people of God, then, will include these who are so often overlooked, these who do not fit our measures of success and celebration. Given who God is, given who Jesus is, then the church will contain these sorts of people.

And why is this so important? Because the rest of us who are not poor in spirit, who don’t go around mourning all the time, who aren’t meek, who aren’t peacemakers, learn something about the kingdom of God from the people who are. Anna Wierzbicka explains who these people are, “They are people who know that they cannot live if God doesn’t do good things for them and who think at the same time that God can and wants to do good things for them.” They help to save us, because it is precisely these sorts of people who will remind us to trust in God. It is precisely these people who will forgive us, extend us mercy, and help us to make peace with ourselves and other people.

The Beatitudes are not commanding us to do these things. But the Beatitudes do call us to live in solidarity and covenant with the people who do. Because only when we live in solidarity and covenant with these, can we truly be the church.

And so, on this Sunday before the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, we remind ourselves that Dr. King and the civil rights movement he led and symbolizes, is not just a movement in American history, but is a movement in the history of the Christian church. And it was a movement animated by the lessons contained, here, within the Sermon on the Mount. We participate in the being of God when we love. And our love is expressed in our solidarity with those in need as we build a beloved community of justice and peace. This is the “end of life.” This is what it means to live the blessed life. We know that because that’s who God is.